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# **Brexit and higher education in Europe: the role of ideas in shaping internationalisation strategies in times of uncertainty**

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## **Abstract**

Based on thematic data analysis of reports from a qualitative cross-country study, the article explores the perceptions of Brexit and collaborations with the UK in different EU countries through the lens of discursive institutionalism. We suggest that in the context of uncertainty characteristic of the post-Brexit referendum period, ideas related to economic concerns and strategic repositioning of national higher education systems subsume the values attached to the European dimension of higher education and research policies. The ideal of educational cooperation based on cultural diversity and national varieties is overridden by concerns expressed in terms of economic rationales. These findings corroborate research that argues that collaboration/cooperation has become a pragmatic and instrumental endeavour. In time, and if the current climate of uncertainty persists, this may further reconfigure institutional strategies and lead institutions to focus on problem solutions rather than the pursuit of the political ends of cooperation.

**Keywords:** Brexit, higher education, discursive institutionalism, collaboration/cooperation

## **Introduction**

In a UK referendum held on 23 June 2016, 51.9 per cent voted in favour of leaving the European Union. On 29 May 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May officially triggered the two-year countdown to formally leaving the European Union (EU), a process known as ‘Brexit’. The referendum results sent shockwaves through the UK higher education sector. It was widely commented on in higher education outside the UK as well, with expressions of dismay – but also of opportunism – coming from various countries, alongside offers to reinforce collaborations, host branches of UK universities, and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, the impact of Brexit on the higher education sector, in the UK and beyond, is still largely unknown. Currently, 6 per cent of students and 17 per cent of staff in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are from non-UK EU countries. The UK is the second largest recipient of EU research funding under the current programme; and among the 20 top providers of co-authors for UK academics, 13 are in the EU (Courtois, 2018a). Potentially adverse consequences of a ‘hard’ Brexit include the UK losing access to EU research funding, mobility programmes and collaborations; and losing EU staff and students, with potentially significant implications for the quality and quantity of research outputs and more broadly for the financial viability and reputation of UK HEIs. Simultaneously Brexit

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<sup>1</sup> E.g.: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-12-12-wide-ranging-new-research-partnership-berlin-universities#>.

may significantly alter the European higher education landscape, influencing the relations that the UK has built with other EU countries while depriving the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) of one of its largest members. In this sense, in the same way as some other ‘crises’, Brexit may prompt discourses potentially shaping and legitimising specific policies at the European, national and institutional levels (Galpin, 2017).

In this context of uncertainty, when “the rules are unclear and the future impossible to forecast, assumptions and values rise to the surface” (Marginson, van der Wende, and Wright, 2018: 9). Thus, unspoken ideas that have been driving higher education policy and practices may become more explicit and discernible. In a way, Brexit provides an opportunity to examine these ideas as they surface in the views, reactions and strategies expressed by individuals in this specific context. The paper draws on a report (Courtois (ed.), 2018) gathering results from research conducted in the second half of 2017 by local teams across 10 EU and ERA countries, which involved 127 interviews with policy makers, university leaders and academics on the topic of Brexit and higher education. In this paper, as well as in the original project, the focus is deliberately decentred from a UK perspective because it is important to analyse how the UK’s EU partners in higher education perceive the UK and their own relationship to the UK in this context.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a broader view is necessary if we are to understand the dynamics and relationships that connect UK HEIs to their European counterparts and the potential impact of Brexit beyond the UK.

Drawing on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), and in particular on the perspective of policy-as-discourse, we examine how, in this context, cognitive ideas (as guidelines for policy actions – “what is and what to do”), subsume normative ideas (“what is good or bad about what is”). We suggest that in the unique context of Brexit, both political values (as normative ideas) and ‘problem solutions’ (as cognitive ideas) are articulated, with varying respective weights, in participants’ words as they share their views of European cooperation in higher education. In particular, our study makes discernible the legitimacy of a more transactional approach to cooperation/collaboration in higher education as a ‘problem solution’ driven mainly by cognitive ideas in the context of uncertainty characterising the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The paper argues that political values of ‘collaboration/cooperation’ and competition tend to assume pragmatic and instrumental features potentially reconfiguring institutional strategies in response to international and global developments in the market for higher education. The research this article draws on captures one moment in time, with many different possible outcomes depending on the course of negotiations: it is not possible to predict future policy based on these findings. Tensions driven by normative and cognitive ideas are not new in higher education but the paper examines a moment when the relative equilibrium between the two is visibly challenged across a range of institutional and national contexts. It thus contributes to an emerging body of research seeking to document, understand and/or predict the potential long-term impact of Brexit on British and European higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, if Brexit is perceived as a willingness on the part of the UK to turn its back on its EU partners, it may encourage the rise of ideas and negative stereotypes that could bear on the course of negotiations (Adler-Nissen, Galpin and Rosamond, 2017).

Policy-as-discourse underlines “the way in which ... emergent discourses were constructed to define the field, articulate the positions and thus subtly set limits to the possibilities” (Ball, 1990: 23) of policies and practices. Considering the potential impacts of Brexit on higher education, it is relevant to look at the views of policy makers, university leaders and academics because policy discourses “produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about” (Ball, 1993: 44). Further, discourses “articulate ... and constrain ... the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment” (Ball, 1993: 49). In these terms, we may argue that in the first instance (in the interim period before negotiation outcomes are made public and implemented), the effects of Brexit are “primarily discursive, it changes the possibilities we have for thinking 'otherwise', thus it limits our responses to change” (Ball, 1993: 49).

Discourses on Brexit are contingent to social-institutional contexts and related to the differential power of actors. Brexit, as a site of contestation over the meanings (Shore and Wright, 1997) of the issue at stake, shows that the actors involved make their meaning of dominant discourses and translate it into the way they appropriate policy instruments and make sense of organisational processes. Thus, the analysis of how policy makers, university leaders and academics make use of cognitive and normative ideas helps understand the weight of these ideas in ascribing meaning to European values such as collaboration/cooperation. From a discursive institutionalist perspective, power is exercised through ideas. It “occurs when actors have the capacity to persuade other actors of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview through the use of ideational elements via their discourse” (Schmidt, 2017: 252). A useful illustration of is given by Schmidt in her analysis of discourses on Brexit: She notes that ideational elements influencing Brexit discourses that focused on immigration and cross-border mobility were associated with social conservatism and concerns about English national identity (Schmidt, 2017).

Following from this, we may hypothesise that the crisis emerging from Brexit may amplify, or at the very least bring to the fore, issues and tensions inherent to cooperation/collaboration in European higher education and research. Thus we may ask: In which ways does European ‘cooperation/collaboration’ contribute to the global competitiveness of Europe as a whole, or relate to competition between European states? Therefore, looking at discourses on Brexit in the context of higher education through a discursive institutionalist perspective can help uncover hybrid discourses driven by normative and cognitive ideas. As analytical categories these two types of ideas underline the weight of normative and cognitive ideas in participants’ considerations of ‘cooperation/collaboration’. In the first part of the paper, we underline the role of ideas in driving discourses on Brexit and we introduce the research. Next, we identify the views of the policy makers, university leaders and academics and highlight the weight of normative and cognitive ideas in ascribing meaning to European values such as collaboration/cooperation and competition. Finally, the paper discusses the prevalence of pragmatic concerns and the potential impact of Brexit on higher education in light of these findings.

### **A discursive institutionalist view on ideas and their role in Brexit political discourses**

Discursive institutionalists (Schmidt, 2008) emphasise the role of ideas in constituting political action. The analysis of ideas configuring political issues matters because it helps

understand how politics and policies translate into different pragmatic and instrumental approaches. This is particularly relevant at this particular juncture, when several different possible futures are in balance. From the perspective of discursive institutionalism, ideas are mobilised in order to shape interests, legitimate and justify political choices and decision-making. If discourses set the conditions for what, how and who is empowered to provide meaning to political action, ideas are the elements that provisionally fix the understanding of changes (Ball, 1993). In other words, ideas driving discourses are not closed identities but rather are constantly being transformed by discursive struggles to fix the meaning in a particular way.

Following from discursive institutionalism, two types of ideas – normative and cognitive – are to be taken into account. Normative ideas “attach values to political action and serve to legitimate the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness” (Schmidt, 2008: 307); and cognitive ideas “provide the recipes, guidelines, and maps for political action and serve to justify policies and programs” (Schmidt, 2008: 306). While normative ideas use principles and values to legitimate social compliance with policies and programmes, cognitive ideas provide taken-for-granted assumptions on political procedures and instruments that justify political action. For example, when applying this analytical framework to the Brexit campaign, Schmidt (2017) describes the Leave side’s argument that ‘emigration is out of control’ as a strong cognitive idea, while the arguments of the Remain side, focused on free movement and cooperation, were of a more normative nature and proved to be less persuasive.<sup>3</sup>

Normative and cognitive ideas do not constitute pure categories. Both normative and cognitive ideas may be mobilised at the same time to configure politics and policies (Schmidt, 2008). Yet they constitute useful categories of analysis to understand how the interests of social actors resulting from norms and values and individual self-conceptions are socially constituted (Scott, 1995). These ideas are part of constitutive processes and their identification contributes to seeing political action as “the enactment of broader institutional scripts rather than a matter of internally generated and autonomous choice, motivation and purpose” (Meyer, Boli and Thomas, 1987, as cited Scott, 1995). In this paper, we use the concept of normative and cognitive ideas descriptively, showing their value to analyse how they legitimate and justify cooperation/collaboration and competition in higher education. As Mehta (2011) would say, normative ideas provide “a heuristic that tells political actors what aspects of the issue to emphasize and what side to take” and function “as a kind of changing cultural touchstone to which actors can appeal in their efforts to advocate for a particular policy or symbol” (Mehta, 2011, p. 42) shaping the ‘problem definition’. In this sense, normative ideas address what seems “desirable, and hence much of political argument is fought at the level of problem definition” (Mehta, 2011, p. 27) – in other words, envisioned solutions often frame the ‘problem definition’ by ascribing a normative value to those ideas. In turn, cognitive ideas configure the problem solutions by pointing out the accomplishment of policy objectives and providing the means for that purpose, thus contributing to justify and validate decision-making processes.

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<sup>3</sup> In this and later papers, Schmidt uses variants such as ‘cognitive validity’ and ‘normative value’.

### ***Trends towards increased competition in European higher education***

The idea of international cooperation has been a cornerstone of the EU's financial support for research collaboration and a key element of the EU's research agenda. Higher education and research were presented by the European Commission as "purposeful, progressive, successful, economically beneficial, collaborative and international" (Keeling, 2006: 211). Already in the 2000s, across Western Europe, the trend towards market competition was challenging the consensual desirability of collaboration/cooperation, which had developed as a cultural value in times of increasingly collaborative research. The meaning of collaboration/cooperation and competition has been contingent on the development of instruments and strategies to become the 'winners' in a competition that can rarely be won on one's own. It has been argued, as an important policy rationale, that market competition could increase the quality of higher education. In a sense, quality and excellence constitute normative values. However, this is a highly contested association, with many researchers and in fact, actors, noting that competition and in particular rankings have led universities away from their public good missions (Lynch 2015, Marginson 2016). While there is a degree of enmeshment of normative and cognitive ideas in the idea of competition, it appears to be driven by cognitive rather than normative ideas. National and European policies based on international competition in higher education and responses to it are increasing (Luijten-Lub et al., 2004) in a context within which the enactment of (quality) management instruments emphasise quality standards as the core instrument to compare the quality of national higher education systems and institutions, depriving quality and excellence of normative meanings.

Thus, in research, this shift has encouraged the formation of networks favouring the more prestigious HEIs and excluding others (Enger, 2018). In relation to international students, the need to compete for students in a globalised market has challenged the core values and ethos of HEIs (Huisman and Van der Wende, 2004). This shift from cooperation to competition encouraged a political move to economic rationales driving European higher education policies. The functional imperatives related to the idea of competition among higher education systems and institutions are visible in the national and institutional strategies to attract incoming (and in some cases fee-paying) students. The internalisation of market-oriented practices has increasingly shaped international education into an economic sector as well as driven stratification between institutions (Bloch and Mitterle, 2017). A report commissioned by the European Parliament lists the key developments in higher education internationalisation as follows: increase in institutional strategies for internationalisation (but also risks of homogenisation, focus on quantitative results only), trend towards increased privatisation in HEIs through revenue generation, "evident shift from (only) cooperation to (more) competition" (Wit, et al., 2015: 22). Attracting foreign students took increased importance in national and institutional strategies, particularly in the UK (Van der Wende and Huisman, 2004). Between the reporting years 2005–2006 and 2014–2015, the proportion of non-EU students in UK universities increased from 9% to 13.8%, and the proportion of EU students increased from 4.4% to 5.5% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Non-EU students were found more valuable as they pay high fees while EU students were considered as a burden on the UK budget. However, while this clearly points to the rising prevalence of economic rationales under conditions of marketization long before the Brexit referendum, it should be noted that while shared in Ireland (Author 1, 2018), this market-led approach to internationalisation is not characteristic of all EU countries (Graf, 2009). Thus, as a strategic

cornerstone, market competition brought to the fore governance and management practices based on cognitive ideas that subsumed normative ideas. With regards to international student recruitment in particular, the tension between normative ideas (e.g., freedom of movement and non-discrimination as philosophic principles) and the centrality of cognitive ideas (e.g., competition for students or research talent as a strategy) provides a particularly useful illustration of the contradictions between the collaboration/cooperation and competition discourses.

In the run-up to the referendum, the UK higher education sector was particularly strong in articulating the role of EU membership in its success as well as the vital relationship between freedom of movement, collaboration and scientific production (Corbett, 2016). Arguments stemming from UK higher education relied on these normative ideas, highlighting the prevalence of collaboration/cooperation as translations of public philosophies into policies. Notwithstanding, in the anti-Brexit mobilisation across UK higher education, a tension emerged between, on the one hand, the embeddedness in EU's foundational principles that promoted the UK's higher education and research achievements and its global reach and on the other hand, relatively 'new' and *ad hoc* ideas stemming from the need to pragmatically counter or deal with Brexit (Corbett, 2016). In this framework, the emphasis on the economic value of EU membership for UK higher education can be interpreted as a cognitive idea, that hybridised the broadly normative anti-Brexit discourse in UK higher education.

### ***The research: The views of policy makers, university leaders and academics***

The paper draws on research conducted as part of a broader project investigating the potential impact of Brexit on higher education in the UK and Europe. This project, initiated by the Centre for Global Higher Education, sought to understand what institutional, system-level and cross-national initiatives and strategies were emerging in relation to Brexit and how these articulated with concurrent changes in UK universities and elsewhere in Europe. It was designed as an exploratory research project focusing on two to three case-study universities in each country. Interviews were conducted in Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland and the UK by local research teams, which adapted details of the initial template to their institutional and national contexts.

A total of 127 interviews were conducted across the ten case study countries. This included 20 interviews at national level, 39 interviews with senior management, 66 interviews with academics (which included 25 early career researchers [ECRs] on insecure contracts) and 7 interviews with individuals in multiple roles. Thematic data analysis was conducted by each national team and the case studies were collated into a report (Courtois (ed.), 2018).

The research took place in a context of uncertainty and emerging strategies. Research participants expressed views and perceptions that were at times speculative and may or may not reflect their future course of action. Nonetheless, they reflected on the one hand their best assessment and anticipation of the situation on the day of the interview; and, on the other hand, their views and reflections documented emerging discourses framing cognitive and normative ideas, which are likely to prefigure policy decisions (Ball, 1993).

## Findings

### *Uncertainty, fears and paralysis about the future*

Uncertainty and concerns for the future of European research – and for the European project at large – were expressed across all case studies. Tensions between collaboration/cooperation and competition driven by normative and cognitive ideas emerged in the analysis of the perceptions of those interviewed.

As interviewees in various countries considered the impact of Brexit on their higher education systems and research activities, the dominant theme was uncertainty, triggering the tension between cognitive and normative ideas. The situation makes it difficult for policy makers and institutional leaders to plan effectively for the future and some expressed their frustration with the lack of clarity and direction provided:

One option is that the UK could decide to continue to support university networking and joint projects as a third country after Brexit. But this would require a different legal and financial framework. I do not expect negotiations to bring clarity on these and a plethora of other issues in the immediate future (research participant, in Van der Wende and Rienks, 2018: 90)

This lack of clarity is especially problematic in Ireland, which relies particularly heavily on the UK for research collaboration and staff mobility but where national and institutional leaders cannot plan ahead because “we don’t know what Brexit will look like” (Gibson and Hazelkorn, 2018: 73).

Consequently, in many cases, strategies were tentative or hesitant. At the national level, Ireland and Denmark had Brexit task-forces or working-groups set up, although particularly in Ireland, higher education was not the strongest focus given the potential implications of Brexit for other economic sectors and the question of Northern Ireland. At the institutional level, however, there was already some indication that UK partners had become a risky choice as leaders on collaborative bids:

... in these times of uncertainty over the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, there has already been a significant reduction in the number of proposed partnerships involving UK partners, given the implicit risks that such partnerships might end by the end of March 2019, compromising all the work and the viability of the projects (Representative of the National Funding Agency, Portugal, in Magalhães, Veiga, and Sá, 2018: 140).

Today, to put it clearly, when I think about the coordination of projects, especially those in the Horizon 2020 ... I do not encourage the researchers to pick Great Britain to be a strong partner in the project, because I expect some turbulence related to Brexit. Because I expect, I do not know, the loss of funding opportunities, and I'm also afraid that these projects may be assessed differently. A bit worse judged because of the uncertainty associated with Brexit. That is why I think that today entering large scientific projects with British universities can be risky (University Leader, Poland, in Szadowski, 2018: 121).



These considerations reflect a tendency to deprive collaboration/cooperation of normative meanings and to focus instead on cognitive and pragmatic problem-solving. A normative stance with regard to collaboration/cooperation and competition between member states and HEIs would be expected to reinforce mobility and partnerships in higher education as a value and a principle. However, the two examples above suggest that this normative attitude towards cooperation with the UK is jeopardised by the need to respond pragmatically to risk and uncertainty. Up until the referendum, the UK has been sought as a research partner due to the prestige of UK HEIs and the presence of high-profile researchers in the UK. Additionally, the UK universities' reputation for having very efficient and well working administrative structures to administer research projects also contributed to making them sought after project leaders. Partnerships with UK institutions were beneficial to their individual partners for the 'knowledge, managerial attitude, and social capital' they brought (University leader, Hungary, in Orosz, Sabic, and Kilin, 2018: 67). While these different, but equally instrumental motivations (using the reputation of UK institutions as a way to increase chances of securing the funding) may have until then motivated the inclusion of UK partners in collaborative bids, here we see that Brexit is framed as creating an urgency, which now makes it legitimate to explicitly and resolutely move cognitive and pragmatic problem-solving to the fore.

Other plans that emerged in this context of uncertainty – and in particular the unknown future of free movement for students and staff - concerned exchange partnerships. Thus, a Portuguese institution envisaged Ireland as a possible replacement for its UK partner (Portugal, Magalhães, Veiga, and Sá, 2018) and similar views were expressed in Poland (Szadowski, 2018). While these measures were evoked as possibilities rather than firmed-up plans, this clearly signals the prevalence of problem-solutions justified by cognitive ideas with vested interests regarding potential partnerships.

### ***Concerns for the reputation of European higher education and research***

Another commonality across the case-studies was concerns for the quality and reputation of European research. The UK's research reputation enhances the profile of European research at large, with benefits to all members. For this reason, several participants perceived the exclusion of the UK as a risk for the ERA. For a Polish interviewee, the UK is crucial in building a 'critical mass' allowing the European Union to compete with the USA or China on a global level; it is also perceived as a gateway to Europe. It is unclear whether Europe would continue being attractive to international researchers without the UK (Szadowski, 2018: 121). In this sense, the inclusion of a highly competition-driven higher education system, on a collaborative basis, is perceived as beneficial to all members. Interestingly, driven by cognitive ideas associated with pragmatic approaches in funding negotiations at the EU level, the Netherlands and Denmark feared they would lose a significant partner and an ally in their negotiations of funding models at the EU level (van der Wende and Rienks, 2018: 39-41; Madsen and Wright, 2018).

It was also feared that Brexit, together with manifestations of anti-EU feelings and the rise of nationalism in various other EU countries, was detrimental to the image of Europe and posed a threat to the European project. Unsurprisingly, this was a major issue in the UK, where policy makers and university leaders felt they had to somehow correct this negative, xenophobic image given by the referendum results:

[W]e are travelling quite a bit to convey the message that we are friendly, we still welcome you (University leader, UK, in Horvath and Courtois, 2018: 171)

This concern was expressed in other countries as well:

People become more sceptical towards migrants in many European countries and also in Germany. With Brexit this problem could grow and make European countries less attractive and also their universities (Interviewee, Germany, in Jungblut and Seidenschnur, 2018: 55).

In line with this, normative ideas (e.g. national identity) associated with concerns over immigration have been feeding and are being fed by Brexit. In particular, in countries where nationalist, anti-EU movements had gained ground (e.g. Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands), this led interviewees to consider whether the UK securing a 'good deal' would be beneficial or instead encourage other countries to leave, with the risk of dismantling the EU. Thus, in Denmark:

Several interviewees mentioned a major concern about a possible domino effect of Brexit. Brexit poses limited concerns if the EU still functions and is strong after Brexit. But interviewees feared that if the Brexit negotiations ended up with an agreement that had no major consequences for the UK, other countries may become inspired by Brexit to follow in the UK's footsteps (Madsen and Wright, 2018: 39).

In this sense, broader political considerations and concerns for the European project became intertwined with practical, sector-specific hopes and concerns. Driven by problem-solutions approaches and thus convening cognitive ideas (here, the need to contain possible contamination from the UK) to justify national and institutional strategies, this pragmatic stance may further jeopardise and delegitimise institutional or national support for the UK higher education sector in future negotiations at EU level.

### ***Regional clusters and unequal partnerships***

Several possible shifts in the configuration of EU partnerships become discernible from respondents' accounts. In particular, Germany emerges as a significant potential 'winner', with countries in both Northern and Eastern Europe planning to reinforce their existing partnerships with German institutions. Although regional clusters are discernible, it seems that establishing links with a key player such as Germany is more important than reinforcing a particular cluster consisting of smaller nations. Regional clusters involving non-EU, but EFTA countries such as Norway and Switzerland is becoming salient. In Horizon 2020, the UK is the top collaborator for one country (Germany) and the second collaborator for nine countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland). By contrast, Germany is the top collaborator for 19 countries and the second for seven countries. Germany has the highest publication count in the EU and is the most successful country in Horizon 2020, while the UK comes second.

As already mentioned, in a context of uncertainty, few countries had implemented specific internationalisation strategies as a direct result of Brexit (and both the UK and Ireland have intensified their efforts to recruit international students in new and emerging markets). Brexit could be used to amplify existing efforts and strategies driven by cognitive ideas. These discussions made discernible global aspirations and a willingness to strengthen

existing partnerships and collaborations with countries outside the EU. China, in particular, was mentioned repeatedly across several case studies (e.g., UK, the Netherlands) with Germany being frequently mentioned as well.

Interviewees across the case-study countries expressed a willingness to continue collaborating with the UK but this willingness was generally significantly qualified, with Danish participants expecting to find a way to continue collaborating somehow, but fearing the excessive administrative burdens that such cooperation would entail. As already mentioned, there was a reluctance, expressed across several case studies, to involve British partners in research bids, or at least a fear that the EU would lose the UK's valuable leadership if not only research projects but Joint Programming Initiatives and other collaborations. Competitive tendencies and cost/benefit calculations may therefore significantly impact the current position of UK higher education within existing formal European networks.

This suggests that a discursive struggle is taking place between the weight of political values such as 'mobility', 'collaboration', 'partnerships', 'cooperation' as worthy by themselves and of cognitive ideas shaping problem-solutions. Cognitive ideas (here, the economic and strategic risks to partner institutions of continuing collaborations with the UK) come to the fore, challenging normative ideas (collaboration as a political value). This is happening at a time when, arguably, a reassertion of normative values could have been expected. Instead, and while the negotiation process is not over yet, cognitive ideas come to the forefront, potentially prefiguring institutional strategies. The substantive content of these ideas drives discourses of political justification regarding cooperation and collaboration.

Interestingly, the research revealed that existing 'horizontal' research collaborations with the UK are sometimes perceived as unbalanced and exploitative in nature, for instance by participants in smaller countries, who were disappointed that their UK partners engaged in these collaborations with different ideas of what research collaboration might look like. Further, a Danish interviewee felt that the motivations of their UK partners were mainly financial, that these had been 'pushed' into collaborations from which their institutions could gain overheads, but that in practice they did not contribute to partnership activities as equal partners, which made for 'unpleasant' experiences (Madsen and Wright, 2018). Hungarian participants spoke of the difficulties they had in establishing and maintaining exchange partnerships with UK institutions and attributed these difficulties to the logic of the market that dictates decision-making processes at UK universities (Orosz, Sabic, and Kilin, 2018: 64). On the one hand, these participants from partner institutions expressed their attachment to normative ideas (equality, mutual respect, science) that they contrasted with their UK partners' motivations; on the other hand, as the power balance may be tipping a little, these criticisms may also justify putting an end to (or negotiating differently) existing collaborations. In terms of the mobility of students under Erasmus+, 31,065 students came to the UK in 2015 for studies or placements. By contrast, the UK only sent out 15,645 students in the same year.<sup>4</sup> On this, a UK interviewee said:

it was supposed to be an exchange programme but we ended up with many more EU students coming into Britain under Erasmus than leaving ... it's costing us [huge sums] each year in terms of the students coming

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<sup>4</sup> Data collected from Europa, Erasmus+ report 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/annual-report-2016-stat-annex\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/annual-report-2016-stat-annex_en.pdf)

in from the rest of the EU (UK policy maker in Horvath and Courtois, 2018: 167).

The logic of market regulation applied to partnerships and collaboration illustrates the role of cognitive ideas driving UK strategies towards higher education and the discomfort that it brings to some EU partners. In turn, these ideas (and negative representations of the UK, possibly influenced by the way the UK electorate voted) may motivate and legitimate a move away from collaborations with the UK in the context of Brexit.

Another type of imbalance between the UK and other countries in the EU concerns the flows of academic and other labour. The UK has long benefitted from labour migration from countries such as Ireland, Poland and Portugal in particular, in higher education as well as other sectors. While Irish interviewees framed this phenomenon in a positive light – in the context of a saturated academic market, the UK is an outlet for ECRs from Ireland – Portuguese and Polish interviewees pointed out that the UK had in fact greatly benefited from labour migration. A Polish interviewee spoke of ‘brain drain’ and even ‘brain seed drain’ (concerning students) from Poland to the UK. In both countries, concerns were expressed about the fate of those who had settled in the UK in terms of residency and citizenship rights (Magalhães, Veiga, and Sá, 2018; Szadowski 2018). Although no direct reference was made to the working conditions of Polish and Portuguese migrants in the UK higher education system, an interview with a UK university leader gave a sense that migrant workers from Eastern Europe were considered as cheap labour:

we, like all the service industries, are reliant on a supply of labour from mainly Eastern Europe. The people who are in our kitchens and our service areas are very well educated, and they are here for all the reasons that the low-pay service industry has got dependent on that source of labour. So, there is a real question whether it’s possible to keep the place going without that layer of expertise and experience and attitude ... And this is where we might have to rethink our salary policies, if we want to keep these places going (University leader, UK, in Horvath and Courtois, 2018: 170).

These perceptions reflect a focus on problem-solutions thus enhancing the justification role that cognitive ideas possess. The pragmatic, problem-solving perspective that these ideas deploy is reconfiguring the collaboration/cooperation partnerships between the UK and Eastern European countries. In this reconfiguration, elements of increasing stratification within the EHEA and the ERA are increasing visible. This stratification is associated with funding conditions and orientations at the national level – with complaints about underfunding expressed in particular by Irish, Polish and Portuguese interviewees. Underfunding, as well as the divide between market vs. public orientations that is discernible in the account from Hungary, further complicate the ERA landscape, challenging the role of normative ideas in driving the European project and cross-European cooperation in higher education.

### ***Degrees of exposure***

The ERA and the EHEA are characterised by unequal power relationships. While Germany emerges as the strongest player, and while, despite their smaller sizes, Scandinavian countries are well placed in the competition for funding, incoming students and influence at the EU

level, case-study countries in Central-Eastern Europe and Southern Europe do not see themselves as strong players or influencers. Concerns varied from one country to another: for Germany, the prospect of Brexit is problematic in terms of student mobility; for both Portugal and Poland, the conditions for their high numbers of expatriates in the UK were preoccupying; while Ireland's strong connections with the UK in all areas (research partnerships, student mobility, staff mobility both within and outside EU exchange programmes, shared facilities) makes it vulnerable on multiple levels.

A recent report argued that regions in Central and Southern Europe were unlikely to be seriously affected by Brexit, while those in closer proximity to the UK (Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium) were exposed to greater trade-related economic risk (Ortega-Argiles 2017). Our findings paint a slightly different picture: while they suggest that those countries studied in Central and Southern Europe may indeed be relatively unaffected, due to their marginal position in UK-centred research networks, they show that among the UK's close partners, some hope to benefit from the departure of the UK. The authors of the German report sum up this attitude with the phrase 'quiet opportunism' (Jungblut and Seidenschneur, 2018) while the report from the Netherlands brings to light the European and global ambitions of Dutch higher education institutions (van der Wende and Rienks, 2018). These perceptions reflect a pragmatic assumption about the opportunities arising from Brexit, showing how ideas featuring policy solutions can reconfigure the higher education global landscape.

In addition, should Brexit significantly deprive them of opportunities, some of the 'stronger' countries are confident that they will be in an advantageous position to forge new global partnerships. This was the case of the Netherlands in particular – although Dutch participants also mentioned that due to the Anglo-Saxon orientation characteristic of their higher education system, Dutch research was vulnerable in other ways under the combined effect of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the US – the same concern was expressed in Norway, which is similarly oriented (Norway, in Maassen and Acar, 2018).

By contrast, Hungary, Portugal and Poland envisaged strengthening their relationships with countries in closer proximity and/or with which they share a common language (e.g. Brazil for Portugal) also underlying the role of cognitive ideas in driving competition for students and graduates and in shaping global imaginaries, with variations depending on each country's status and negotiating position. As noted by Adler-Nissen, Galpin and Rosamund (2017), discourses on Brexit shape the future but also reconstruct the past, with countries drawing on their own national identities and histories to imagine future connections.

The accounts from Ireland are more cautious. Ireland may benefit in certain ways, but its research sector depends heavily on both formal and informal links to the UK and the prospect of a hard border on the island is a source of great concern. Above all, the current relatively low level of national funding for higher education may hinder Ireland's efforts to reposition itself in the European and global higher education landscape (Ireland, in Gibson and Hazelkorn, 2018; see also Courtois, 2018b). In relation to funding and state support, similar concerns were expressed in Portugal and Poland, although without the sense of an imminent opportunity that will likely be missed.

### ***Staff mobility and academic labour markets***

Participants in most case-study countries expressed the view that Brexit provided an opportunity to recruit high-profile academics currently based in the UK and were relatively candid about their hopes to ‘poach’ UK-based academics. Reservations were expressed, however, due to the congested nature of academic labour markets for entry-level positions – in particular in Ireland, where it was felt that inviting UK residents would not be well received by the many local applicants awaiting positions – even though applications from UK staff had already increased, leading to several recruitments.

There was criticism about the level of funding being made available, e.g. to attract “refugees from Brexit”, with one institutional leader suggesting the government had a naïve view of Ireland’s attractiveness. On the other hand, HE leaders are reluctant to be perceived as “predatory” towards their UK partners, who they will want to continue to work with post-Brexit (Gibson and Hazelkorn, 2018: 76).

In Portugal and in Poland, it was felt that existing salary structures would make them unattractive destinations and that they would be unable to benefit from a ‘Brexodus’.

At the national and institutional levels, the perceptions are that Portugal is not, with the exception of very few research areas, an attractive destination for top foreign researchers and academics due to weak competitiveness of Portuguese salaries and legal administrative procedures (Magalhães, Veiga, and Sá, 2018: 141).

For academics themselves, Brexit created significant anxiety. UK-based academics feared waves of restructurings and redundancies in the wake of Brexit and loss of funding – in particular in disciplines not deemed profitable, such as those in the Humanities. ECRs perceive themselves as particularly vulnerable as their employment as contract researchers largely depends on the availability of research grants. The prospect of a hard Brexit complicated ECRs’ perceptions of their future in the UK and in the sector in particular, which, as noted in other research, are already tinged by significant anxiety (Morley et al. 2018; O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019). This climate of fear did not only affect researchers based in the UK but also those elsewhere:

Our own postdocs are not looking for positions in the UK anymore, and find positions in the EU or in the United States. Which means there are globally fewer positions. Because the UK is not here anymore (University leader, Switzerland, in Sautier, 2018: 153).

### **Brexit, ideas and the future of collaboration/cooperation**

Significant tensions emerged in relation to ideas driving cooperation and competition, bringing to light the different dynamics at play in the internationalisation of higher education systems. In ascribing meaning to national and institutional strategies in response to Brexit, it is visible that a significant tension between normative and cognitive ideas emerges. This tension contributes to hybridizing a Brexit discourse shaped by interests of collaboration/cooperation or competition. While international research collaboration takes different forms – some of which do not require centralised funding mechanisms – the EU has

played a significant role in strengthening EU-wide research collaboration by funding collaborative research projects, shared research facilities and academic and student exchange programmes. Further, the EU facilitates student and staff mobility within Europe. The UK is an important research partner for research teams across Europe; it is where several key research facilities are located; and it is a popular destination for students and staff from many EU countries. A normative stance towards international research collaboration has been driven by the consensual desirability of having UK as a key partner. Its inclusion in the EU is valued particularly by academics as it is the case of those collaborating with UK partners in ongoing research activities. In Portugal:

...beyond financial losses, what is at stake is the weakening of ‘collaborations, the multidisciplinary of the collaborations, and we cannot live without them (Magalhães, Veiga, and Sá, 2018: 142).

On the other hand, EU countries and institutions are competing for international students and for EU research funding bringing to the fore the weight of cognitive ideas in strategizing processes in dealing with Brexit. For countries where HEIs offer tuition in English, a ‘hard Brexit’ may provide an opportunity to capture international students – it is assumed that the UK’s EU membership is attractive to non-EU students and that they may consider Ireland, Denmark or the Netherlands should the UK no longer be part of the EU. These countries may also benefit in terms of increased intra-European flows although these are less lucrative.

As previous research suggests, the rationale for internationalisation in the UK has been distinctly market-oriented when compared to the rest of the EU (e.g. Knight & de Wit 1995, Huisman and van der Wende 2004). Therefore, it remains to be seen what role normative ideas related to European principles of non-discrimination and social cohesion will have in post-Brexit Europe. However, while the ERA and EHEA – and the European project at large – are perceived as being under threat, the dominant perspectives and strategies that emerged from the case studies seem to indicate that a return to a normative vision of cooperation/collaboration is unlikely in the context of post-Brexit Europe.

With the exception of the UK, no clear signs of mobilisation on the part of academic communities had become visible to research participants. A sense of powerlessness and paralysis pervaded many of the accounts given by academics across the case studies. Yet, normative ideas were expressed clearly by academics in most case studies, with contrasted understandings of collaboration/cooperation and research. Actually, some academics (e.g., in Denmark, Germany, Portugal) expressed the view that they would continue cooperating with their UK colleagues no matter how the political landscape changes post-Brexit:

If politicians decide to limit internationalisation in academia, academics resist and do the opposite (Germany, in Jungblut and Seidenschnur, 2018: 54).

Also in Portugal, Brexit was perceived by those interviewed as more of a political issue, rather than an academic concern. In this sense, the historical, scientific and academic collaboration/cooperation makes the bi-lateral relationships between Portuguese and UK institutions still relevant and not dependent on policy-makers. The ties established with universities in the UK are based on what academics perceive as the core of their activity rather than on policy makers’ plans. This further illustrates the struggles around ideas and identities taking place within universities (e.g. Steiner, Sundström and Sammalisto, 2013) to fix the meaning of collaboration/cooperation and that Brexit might exacerbate, potentially

widening the gap between academics' and managers' perceptions of European higher education.

## **Conclusion**

Arguably, the announcement of the Brexit referendum results could have encouraged mutual reassurances between EU countries and a reaffirmation of normative values. Yet our research suggests that this is not happening. The article has explored the perceptions of Brexit and collaboration with the UK in different EU countries through the lens of discursive institutionalism, in order to better understand how normative and cognitive ideas shape discourses and potentially practices in higher education and research. This framework is particularly useful to understand change in contexts of crisis and uncertainty as it helps discern the substantive content of discourses shaping policy and practice. Therefore, it helps understand the complexity of discourses rather than take them at face value. In this instance, the concepts of normative and cognitive ideas were useful to understand how different weights of normative and cognitive ideas struggle to fix the meaning of collaboration/cooperation. Focusing on different types of ideas as analytical devices helps uncover how interests regarding cooperation/collaboration in international research are socially defined. In other words, cognitive ideas are apparently feeding Brexit discourses. This means that economic concerns and strategic repositioning of national higher education systems (cognitive ideas) subsume the values attached to the European dimension of higher education and research policies, namely those related to freedom of movement, non-discrimination and social and economic cohesion (normative ideas), contributing to shape the interests regarding collaboration/cooperation. This corroborates existing research that argues that collaboration/cooperation has largely become a pragmatic and instrumental endeavour (e.g. Huisman & van der Wende 2004). It also suggests that Brexit may be the catalyst, or justification, to accelerate this trend, potentially shaping institutional strategies designed to pursue the political ends of cooperation.

Concomitantly, at the European level, educational cooperation is now directed to position European higher education globally. The ideal of educational cooperation based on cultural diversity and national varieties might be pushed aside by concerns expressed in terms of economic rationales. Thus, the ongoing tension between cooperation and competition in European higher education that have intensified over time and to which Brexit may be a catalyst become especially visible. While Brexit was not the trigger, as a context of crisis and uncertainty, we can assume that it legitimises the articulation of more strategic and instrumental views – as well as resistance to these views and reaffirmation of idealistic principles.

The interviews conducted as part of the project captured one moment in time, when many different futures are possible. Views were not homogeneous across the sector, with academics more likely to re-emphasise normative values compared to senior managers for instance. Nonetheless, the perceptions of national and institutional leaders in particular, and academic staff to a lesser extent, shows that the meaning of collaboration/cooperation is driven by problem-solution ideas focusing on strategic partnerships and market-like mechanisms. These discourses rest on strategic considerations and on instrumental values that are distinctly market-driven and results-oriented. In other domains as well (Galpin, 2017), cognitive ideas have been flourishing on the ground on which Brexit is perceived as



opportunities and threats for Europe and mainly threats for the UK and contributing to assign meanings at the expense of European values and principles of collaboration/cooperation. As argued by Ball (1990, 1993), discourses shape policy and political action by imposing particular worldviews and by defining and limiting what can be viewed as possible and/or necessary. Thus, the ideas examined here could significantly impact the course of negotiations and influence the shape of post-Brexit European higher education and research landscape. For instance, these pragmatic concerns may reinforce unbalanced partnerships and stratification, with significant implications for the cohesion of European higher education systems. In some cases, these ideas are already shaping political choices with regard to collaboration/cooperation with the UK. In time, this emerging consensus may significantly alter the understanding of cooperation/collaboration and further encourage straight market competition for funding and research.

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